

# **The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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## **Law Enforcement Officers and Physical Fitness**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The stresses that law enforcement officers face each day present a unique challenge to police departments. With all of the challenges facing police officers today, law enforcement officers should be physically fit if for no other reason than it can reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease. There is nothing anyone can do regarding age and family history, but all other risk factors can be positively influenced by life style changes, including exercise and diet. Being physically fit not only helps a law enforcement officer deal with the physical demands, it also helps with the mental stressors on the job. Stress can take a toll on a law enforcement officer, both mentally and physically. Police agencies have come to understand that physical fitness cannot only save officers lives, it can save the taxpayers money.

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## INTRODUCTION

According to President Kennedy in 1960 “Physical fitness is not only one of the most important keys to a healthy body, it is the basis of dynamic and creative intellectual activity” (para. 5). In society, today law enforcement officers are commonly seen as out of shape people who can always be found at the local donut shop. While not a complete representation of the profession as a whole, there is no denying that physical fitness should be a high priority for the law enforcement community.

Many police departments create philosophy or mission statements to guide and the members of their department. Agencies believe that law enforcement officers should be held to the highest standards of professionalism and integrity to enhance the quality of life of all the members of the community by enforcing the laws. Both mental and physical fitness are required to be able to accomplish that statement and to that end a law enforcement officer should be physically and mentally fit to accomplish this mission.

Because of the unique demands that are placed on members of the law enforcement profession physical fitness plays a pivotal role in their health and well-being. Police agencies need to take steps to ensure that a healthy lifestyle and physical fitness regimen are incorporated by members of their agencies. Exercise has been linked to help control on the job stress in several ways. These benefits include increasing self-confidence/self-image, improvements in alertness and concentration, reduction of fatigue, and an increase in strength and stamina. According to the Harvard Men’s Health Watch (“Exercising,” 2011), the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (“Physical Activity,” n.d.), and the Mayo Clinic (“Exercise and Stress,” 2015),

exercise can reduce the body's stress hormones and stimulate the production of the endorphins, which is a chemical in the brain that acts as the body's natural pain killers and mood enhancers.

## **POSITION**

The stress that law enforcement face each day present a unique challenge to police departments. The demands that shift work place on a body can be challenging to even the most physically fit person. Add to that the pressure that comes with making life and death decisions, being called on to solve complex issues that took years to create, dealing with death, tragedy, and tense situations on a daily basis, the potential is ripe for a breakdown of both the mental and physical faculties.

With all the challenges facing police officers today, law enforcement officers should be physically fit if for no other reason than it can reduce the risk for cardiovascular disease. A law enforcement officer's job is primarily sedentary with short bouts of vigorously intense activities. If a law enforcement officer continues with a sedentary life style, the chances of cardiovascular disease and stroke can increase by 50% ("Risk Factors," n.d.). According to the Officer Down Memorial page, there have been 144 law enforcement officers who have died from a heart attack on the job from 2007 to February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017 ([www.odmp.org](http://www.odmp.org)). Through diet and exercise, a law enforcement officer can see many benefits both mentally and physically.

Exercising on a regular basis can reduce law enforcement officers risk of developing a many diseases, chief among them cardiovascular disease.

Cardiovascular disease is the number one killer of men and women worldwide accounting for more than 17.3 million death per year according to the American Heart

Association (Mozaffarian et al., 2016). According to the World Heart Federation, risk factors for cardiovascular disease include having an abnormal blood cholesterol level, hypertension, cigarette smoking, prediabetes, family history, sedentary lifestyle, obesity, and age.

There is nothing anyone can do regarding age and family history, but all other risk factors can be positively influenced by lifestyle changes, including exercise and diet (Brinks & Franklin, 2016). According to the American Heart Association, by reducing high blood pressure, abnormal cholesterol levels, smoking, obesity, and sedentary lifestyle, the chances of having a heart attack or experiencing any other cardiac event are decreased (Myers, 2003). Regular exercise can also assist the body's ability in its use of insulin to control glucose levels in the blood (Myers, 2003). Low-density lipoprotein (bad cholesterol) can be lowered and high-density lipoprotein (good cholesterol) can be raised with the aid of regular exercise and weight loss (Myers, 2003). According to Brinks and Franklin (2016), for every 40 points cholesterol is lowered, the risk of having a heart attack decreased by 50%. In combined studies, researchers found a formal exercise program decreased the death rate by 20% to 25% in heart attack patients (Myers, 2003).

The US National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health completed a study on Sedentary Behaviors Increase Risk of Cardiovascular Disease Mortality in Men from 1982 to 2003 (Warren et al., 2010). The study recorded 7,744 men from the ages of 20 to 89 who were free of any cardiovascular disease. All participants answered a questionnaire regarding time spent riding in a car and watching television during a week. During the 21 years of follow up, 377 cardiovascular disease

deaths were recorded. After comparing the two sedentary behaviors, it was discovered men who reported to riding in a vehicle for at least 10 hours or watching television for more than 23 hours per week, had an 82% and 64% greater risk of dying from a cardiovascular disease than those who recorded less than 4 hours of riding in a car or 11 hours of watching television (Warren et al., 2010).

According to the Commission of Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA) article, the calculated cost of an in-service heart attack is between \$400,000 and \$750,000 (Smith & Tooker, 2005). The medical cost is not the only factor to be considered when looking at this issue. Following a heart attack, it is likely the officer will be away from the job for two weeks to three months during the recovery stage, depending on the severity of the heart attack ("Heart Attack Recovery," 2015). Studies on law enforcement officers who are more physically fit have 40% to 70% less absenteeism than less fit officers (Smith & Tooker, 2005).

Law enforcement officers should be physically fit because it can reduce an officer's level of negative impacting stress. Other than having the opportunity to be physically demanding, a law enforcement officer's job can be very stressful. Law enforcement officers tend to encounter people on their worst days and deal with other's problems as well as their own. Day after day of observing and listening to negative content, stress begins to increase in a law enforcement officer's life.

Law enforcement is a very stressful job. Not only does a law enforcement officer deal with the stress of negativity from the community they are sworn to protect, but also in the infrastructure as well. Police officers must deal with administrative duties with tight deadlines, lack of cohesiveness with co-workers and supervisors, and everyday

pressures from life in general. Being physically fit not only helps a law enforcement officer deal with the physical demands, it also helps with the mental stressors on the job. Stress can take a toll on a law enforcement officer, both mentally and physically. In the past few years, evidence and research has shown how unmanaged stress can lead to anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bond, 2014). There were a total of 518 police suicides recorded in the years 2008, 2009, 2012, and 2016 ([www.policesuicidestudy.com](http://www.policesuicidestudy.com))

Police agencies have come to understand that physical fitness cannot only save officers lives, it can save the taxpayers money. The rising cost of healthcare in America today has been difficult for many cities to cope with. This money is primarily lost due to lost productivity from employees as well as from medical costs. Law enforcement officers should be physically fit because it can reduce absenteeism from the job. Absenteeism is defined by dictionary.com as “frequent or habitual absence from work or school” (n.d.).

When absent from the job, not only are your fellow law enforcement officers affected, the citizens of the community are affected as well. When officers are absent from work for any length of time due to illness or injury, the shift still must be covered with less manpower. This results in officers being forced to pick up the slack and hurts productivity.

Another benefit of law enforcement officers remaining physically fit is the reduction it provides in absenteeism from the job. In a study from 1986 to 2005, the association of obesity and sick-leave was followed in 43,989 Swedish men. The body mass index (BMI) of each of the participants and separated into underweight, normal



weight, overweight, and obese. The BMI groups were then compared to sick leave taken. The study consistently showed men in the overweight and obese categories showed a much higher risk for sick-leave and for longer durations (Neovius, Neovius, Kark, & Rasmussen, 2012).

## **COUNTER POSITION**

Despite the known benefits of being physically active and staying fit, there is always the possibility of becoming injured during the process. Working out can cause injuries that require medical attention and lead to loss of work time. These injuries can happen to anyone regardless of the fitness level ("Workout Injuries," 2016). Injuries can occur in everyday activities including walking, light lifting, and pivoting. According to the American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons ("Safe Exercise," 2012), some individuals could have predisposed conditions (i.e. high arches in the feet or bowed legs) which could lead to injuries. From 1990 to 2007, over 970,000 individuals were treated in emergency rooms from weight lifting training activities and during that time, 114 people died participating in weight lifting training exercises (Johnson, 2016). There are more than 10,000 individuals treated in emergency rooms every day for sports, recreational, and exercise related injuries (Johnson, 2016).

A transient increase in the risk of receiving a cardiac related complication can occur during exercise, but the risk is very small (Myers, 2003). The chance of having a heart attack or serious heart rhythm disorder ranges one in every 400,000 to 800,000 hours of exercise (Myers, 2003). Although there is a chance of receiving a cardiac related complication during exercise, the rewards of exercise outweigh the risks. Dr. Baggish, associate director of the Cardiovascular Performance Program at Harvard-

affiliated Massachusetts General Hospital said, “there's absolutely no question that regular, moderate-intensity exercise is the best way to prevent sudden cardiac arrest” (“Don't worry,” 2015, para. 4).

Although there is always a chance of injury during exercise, the real danger comes from not being physically fit. There are many ways to reduce the risk of injury while exercising. A warm-up prior to any moderate or vigorous exercise increases the heart rate and blood flow to your muscles, preparing your body for a workout. Stretching prior to a workout session is imperative to decrease injuries. Stretching targeted muscle groups increases flexibility, which allows muscles, tendons and joints to move freely through a full range of motion, decreasing the chance of injury (Nadelen, 2016). The cool down period after a workout is often forgotten and a vital part of injury prevention. Cooling down with low intensity cardio followed by static stretching of the targeted muscle groups can decrease muscle soreness and assist with muscle recovery (Nadelen, 2016).

Everyone has heard the term of “no pain, no gain,” but when uncomfortable pain occurs during exercises, the body is sending a message. Continuing to exercise through pain can cause minor and even major injuries to muscles, tendons, and joints (Nadelen, 2016). Staying hydrated will decrease chances of heat exhaustion and heat stroke. Consuming 17 to 20 ounces of water two to three hours prior to a workout and eight ounces of water 20 to 30 minutes before the workout is a good start (“Workout Injuries,” 2016). It is also recommended to consume eight ounces of water every 10 to 20 minutes during the workout and eight ounces of water within 30 minutes following the

workout (“Workout Injuries,” 2016). When beginning a new exercise program, it is important to ease into it and slowly increase the time and intensity (Nadelen, 2016).

But there is no time to workout. Yes, some workout plans do require dedicated time and specialized equipment depending on that person’s physical fitness goal. The American Heart Association (2014) and the American College of Sports Medicine (2011) recommend at least 150 minutes (30 minutes a day, five days a week) of moderate intensity aerobic activity or 75 minutes (25 minutes a day, three days a week) of vigorous aerobic activity a week for overall cardiovascular health. Multiple shorter sessions of at least 10 minutes in a day is acceptable to accumulate the recommended daily exercise (ACSM, 2011).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Law enforcement agencies should implement a physical fitness and wellness program to ensure their officers remain healthy for the job, the community, their families, and themselves. Law enforcement agencies could start by designating an employee to be in charge of the physical fitness and wellness program. That employee should have knowledge in the fitness and wellness field and be able to teach others on how to live a healthy life style. Law enforcement agencies could implement physical fitness standards in a policy to ensure officers remain in good physical health.

When law enforcement officers maintain a healthy level of physical fitness, they can ensure the health risks will decrease and the quality of life will increase. Law enforcement officers not only need to be fit to survive the job, but to survive retirement as well. With cardiovascular disease being the leading cause of death among men and women worldwide, it is important for law enforcement officers to use physical fitness to

lower the risks. Numerous studies have shown the direct impact of increased physical fitness levels and the decreased risks of cardiovascular disease.

Law enforcement officers will also benefit from being more physically fit by having reduced stress. While being less stressed helps with an officer's productivity at work, it also helps with the home life. Physical fitness benefits a law enforcement agency with less sick time being used, less insurance claims being made, and less money spent on worker's compensation. When absenteeism declines, not only does the agency benefit, the community benefits with having more law enforcement officers at work to protect the citizens.

Some try to say exercising will cause more injuries. Becoming more physically fit will reduce the risk of injuries during exercise and everyday activities. When an officer exercises as recommend by the American Heart Association (2014) and the American College of Sports Medicine (2011), the officer will be in better shape having more strength, stamina, flexibility, and mental acuity. With shift work and trying to balance a healthy home life, some officers claim there is not enough time to exercise. By being able to split exercise into 10 to 15 minute segments twice a day for five days a week, a healthier lifestyle is reachable. Law enforcement officers need to incorporate exercise into the daily routine.

Even though a law enforcement officer's job is mainly sedentary, officers need to make sure it does not continue while off duty to make it a lifestyle. It is imperative for law enforcement agencies to implement a physical fitness and wellness program. With a physical fitness and wellness program, a law enforcement agency can see many benefits, including healthier officers, a decreased negative impact of stress on officers,

and decreased absenteeism. Law enforcement agencies will benefit from a physical fitness and wellness program because the officers benefit.

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